HOW NORMAN MAILER SAVED BARNEY ROSSET AND GROVE PRESS

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ARGUMENTS BY: NORMAN MAILER

Rosset
By Barney Rosset
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INSIDE OF BARNEY'S ROSSET'S MEMOIR, *ROSSET*, which was first published back in 2016 in hardcover via O/R Books, there's a photo of the influential Grove Press publisher taken by Allen Ginsberg. A shot taken of Mr. Obscene at a Tower Books New York symposium in the early 1990s is captioned eloquently by Mr. Howl himself: "Publisher hero Barney Rosset whose [sic] Grove Press legal battles liberated U.S. literature and film." There isn't a better way to summarize Rosset's legacy. All throughout the mid-to-late-1950s and well into the 1960s, Rosset was continuously under legal attack at the local, state, and federal levels. Challenging censorship, Barney Rosset went to court in defense of his company's decision to distribute such controversial films and books as Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), Vilgot Sjoman's *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), expurgated versions of D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Henry Miller's influential *Tropic of Cancer*. Fighting the de facto censorship of the era in the priggish United States courts of the 1950s and winning, Rosset challenged censors even more when Grove Press published William S. Burroughs's cut-up *Naked Lunch* in 1962 which, in turn, was subjected to a pugnacious, if not even more vehement attack on a literary work by our legal system. Were these books of any actual literary merit,

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essential to the growth of our society and culture—the U.S. government wanted to know. Or were books and films like *Tropic of Cancer*, *Naked Lunch*, and *I Am Curious (Yellow)* instead pornographic transgressions penned by a collection of "sick men" which Rosset was pushing to make a dollar? It was a question that might be best answered by some of the era's most significant writers and critics, lawyers decided. Enter Norman Mailer—Barney Rosset's star witness.

Yet, this is what is frustrating about *Rosset*; the subtitle of his memoir *My Life in Publishing and How I Fought Censorship* really gets in the way of Barney Rosset actually providing the reader with an inside glimpse into the mind or process of some of the greatest writers that he ever published. While Barney Rosset was the guy who introduced the writings of Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, William S. Burroughs, Che Guevara and many others to the American public, he was also the one who uncompromisingly footed the bill to break down the censorship barriers in the United States with Grove Press to get their works out there—and in doing so, nearly went out of business several times. Yet, Rosset didn't break censorship barriers all alone; he had the help of many, including Norman Mailer—yet, Mailer here in *Rosset* is almost only a footnote within the book's 331 pages. When Rosset does mention Mailer in his memoir, it's so casual, grievous. Indeed, Mailer's name pops up across *Rosset* several times, but it is in these moments that Rosset uses it for shock and awe (Mailer and his wife get into a fight at a party Rosset hosts in the 1960s), or tout his fancy Hampton's palace, which he uses to remind us of just how awful Mailer's 1970 film *Maidstone* is. He is never shy about denoting how his Hampton's house served as Mailer's principal shooting location in the book. But, it is difficult to ignore the irony in such a mention, as Rossett, himself, has also been a self-proclaimed proveyors, one of the true champions of the experimental and avant-garde cinema. Yet, he can not bring himself to say anything positive about Mailer's film, nor point out what Mailer's intentions with the project were, how it came to fruition. Instead, he's fast to suggest that Mailer's film is an experimental feature gone awry following a haze of chaos, seemingly missing its essential influence as the radical pre-cursor to the Reality TV zeitgeist of today. Mailer not only took inspiration for *Maidstone* from the assassination of Robert Kennedy, but also from Rosset's own *I Am Curious (Yellow)*. Both films revel in a mutual stream-of-consciousness mise-en-scene, skewing of reality, political and ideological juxtaposition, as well as Gesalt or onieric editing.

Rosset only includes Mailer's name as a sort of footnote as he writes deeper into the book across the chapters pertaining to his legal matters associated with the publishing of *Naked Lunch* and the distribution of the film *I Am Curious (Yellow)*. As history has shown, however, Mailer's contribution to both of these landmark court cases was significant—not casual, nor incidental, a bit more than a footnote's worth. Mailer and his New Jersey kin Allen Ginsberg were Grove Press stalwarts who came to the defense of Rosset's cause in the 1960s more than any other public intellectual or artist called upon by Rosset's defense team. So, it is exceedingly frustrating to turn through Rosset's memoir and encounter both only mentioned in passing via a single sentence. It is seemingly as if Rosset has passed them over so he can take sole credit in the fight against United States censors. The whole omission makes Rosset come across, at times, as being quite bumptious.

As when it comes to matters of this ilk, Rosset's burning desire in life, as he writes, had always been to fight against authority and censorship; his credo: "there isn't a word that shouldn't be allowed to be published." He is forever keen on reminding us over and over and over all throughout *Rosset* about his cause. As a reader with a fair sense of literary history might recall, Rosset wasn't exactly the first publisher in the United States to be attacked for bringing a controversial work to the public's eye. Earlier, and maybe as influential, if not more so, Lawrence Ferlinghetti certainly predates Rosset as he had nearly gone to jail himself when he was put on trial for publishing Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* via his City Lights Pocket Books a year or two prior in 1957.

Perhaps, a reader should be grateful for only the two or three mentions of Mailer in *Rosset*, though. If there were any more a reader might have to endure another account of the stabbing of Adele Morales, Mailer's second wife in 1960 at a party. It was a party that Rossett attended but left before the actual knifing occurred. After all, Rosset is on the record in Peter Manso's oral history *Mailer: His Life and Times* about the evening. Another missed opportunity here might have been a mention of how Mailer's 1976 Henry Miller book, *Genius and Lust: A Journey Through the Major Writings of Henry* Miller came to fruition at Grove Press with Rosset. Or, perhaps something about how Mailer was persuaded to work on the Miller treatise as a means to create the method in which he could then help a broke friend—Buzz Farbar—whom Rosset and Mailer had serve as an editor on the project. True, Rosset does cover this ground at a quick pace in the late-1990s French TV

documentary about Mailer, *Advertisements for Himself*—which, curiously, also features a commentary on Mailer by Kate Millett.

To his credit, Rosset does spend quite a bit of time in his memoir recounting his encounters with writers like Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs and Samuel Beckett—his Big Three. When Grove Press published *Naked Lunch* in 1962, the censors immediately attacked the Burroughs book—they had been waiting for it. Rosset had delayed releasing the book for several months following the financial windfall he was experiencing in the defense of *Tropic of Cancer* and didn't want two books on trial in the United States at the same time. The Burroughs book had been published prior in Paris through Maurice Grodias's Olympia Press in 1959 thanks to the help of Terry Southern. Rosset takes to praising the chutzpah of Olympia Press's publisher Maurice Grodias in his memoir. In doing so, Rosset becomes questionable as a personality, as once a hero to writers, how can a reader continue to hold him in any true esteem with a modest sense of literary history in play? Maurice Grodias had a reputation for stealing royalities from his writers—including William S. Burroughs—as well as claiming copyright ownership on works that he didn't own, like *Candy* in the early-1960s. In the end, with his chutzpah catching up with him, he too would eventually be tried on obscenity charges in France himself. Found guilty, fined, he would be banned from publishing for 20 years. Stealing the work of authors is something to admire and admonish.

When excerpts of Burrough's *Naked Lunch* were published in the United States in 1959 in publications like *Chicago Review*, *Black Mountain Review*, and *Big Table* magazine, the United States mail seized the publications in transit. Citing that the magazines contained obscene material from the Burroughs novel—Gross Press was accused of being in violation of U.S. Federal law. Famously, *Naked Lunch* was banned in Boston in 1962, and in 1965 the Burrough's novel was put on trial by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Armed to the teeth with lawyers, Rosset brought in Edward De Garzia (taking over for Cy Rembar) and assistant Daniel Klubock. However, to rescue *Naked Lunch* it would take the testimony of Norman Mailer to validate the Burroughs's novel to prove that the cut-up book was, in fact, a work of tremendous literary merit and not smut (Interestingly, Mailer's own *An American Dream* had been mentioned in the court, on the record, as also being a work of violation, with its anal sex between Ruta and Stephan Rojack).

While there had been some notable artists testifying on the behalf of the Burroughs book and Grove Press, it is difficult to not see how the testimony of Mailer and later, Allen Ginsberg, proved to be the defense's most provocative. Grove Press might've lost its case and been forced to shut down, not to mention, fined; Rosset even, if the book had been found to be obscene—its publication found in violation of the U.S. Federal Law—could've been sent off to jail (Burroughs was waiting for updates on the trial as it unfolded in Boston from afar in Tangiers, just as Henry Miller had kept his distance himself a few years earlier when Rosset was fighting for *Tropic of Cancer*; Miller chose to ignore his subpoena to appear to testify by hiding out in Big Sur).

Attorney General of Massachusetts vs. A Book Named Naked Lunch [1]

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Mr. Mailer, you have referred to the fact that in some of your writings you deal with political matters. Would it be unfair to say that in much of your writing, both as a novelist and as an essayist, you deal with moral questions and moral matters?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, I try to. It's like saying

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: What's good and bad.

NORMAN MAILER: If you're a ballplayer you would not like to say you are a good third baseman, you try to play third base. You try to deal with moral questions. Whether you deal with them well is another matter.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: When I use the word "moral," there, I mean, you are trying to deal with questions of good and bad and good and evil?

NORMAN MAILER: I try to deal with such questions.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: You have read *Naked Lunch*, the book before the Court?

NORMAN MAILER: Yes, I have.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Do you have some opinion as to its importance?

NORMAN MAILER: I have a changing opinion as to its importance, because I have now read the book, not completely, but I have read the book completely twice. I have read more than two-thirds of the book, in other words, three times. I have encountered the book over a period of about three

or four years; or to be more precise, I first encountered it in 1959, in the magazine *Big Table*. I read an excerpt from it; then I read the book entirely about two years ago when it came out. In the last few days, I have read it very slowly and carefully. I have read the first hundred and ten pages.

THE COURT: What is the association between *Big Table* and *Naked Lunch*?

MAILER: *Big Table* is a magazine.

THE COURT: I assume it is a trade magazine.

MAILER: *Big Table* was a magazine that was put out by some editors who had left the *Chicago Review*, which was a literary magazine of the University of Chicago.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Mr. Mailer, would you now tell us, in your own words, the importance that you see in the novel, changing as it may be?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, the change I have mentioned, the change because what is interesting about it to me I started reading the book. I liked the book very much when I read it. The last time I said, "Fine thing." I started to read it with trepidation, whether I didn't like it as much.

THE COURT: Did that concern you too much?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, if I am going to testify on it

THE COURT: In that light, pardon me.

NORMAN MAILER: So, I found, as I read it

THE COURT: If you read a book once and took a fancy to it and read it a second time and didn't like it, you wouldn't want to take your life under those circumstances, would you?

NORMAN MAILER: No, sir. At any rate I found I had more respect for the reading of it this time. I haven't finished it. I had to read slowly and think about it a great deal, as to my respect for it. I have a feeling that it is much more of a literary work than I felt the previous time, even though the previous time I felt it was a work of high talent. The man has extraordinary talent. Possibly he is the most talented writer in America. As a professional writer I don't like to go about bestowing credit on any other writers.

THE COURT: Have you read him before?

NORMAN MAILER: I read a book, *Junky*; and I read it in a paperback; and it is just a very good, hard-boiled sort of novel. It is a false novel. He wrote it to make some money; but it is well written. Small portions of it, as a matter of fact, appear in *Naked Lunch* as one of the themes. But I felt, reading it through this last time, I had the feeling that the work presents a kind of complexity which I will not compare to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, I'd say it is not without comparison. It's possible, as a work that would take considerable inquiry and study. I found it considerably less shocking as I read it this time. I felt it more and more, the purpose in the various parts of it. The first time through I thought it was well-written. The man has extraordinary style. He catches just a little of the beauty. I think he catches the beauty, at the same time the viciousness and the meanness and the excitement, you see, of ordinary talk, the talk of criminals, of soldiers, athletes, junkies. There is a kind of speech that is referred to as gutter talk that often has a very fine, incisive, dramatic line to it; and Burroughs captures that speech like no American writer I know. He also—and this makes it impressive to me as a writer—he also has an exquisite poetic sense. His poetic images are intense. They are often disgusting; but at the same time there is a sense of collision in them, of montage that is quite unusual. And, as I say, all this together gives me great respect for his style. But I also began to feel that really this time there is more to his intent than I had ever recognized before; that the work was more of a deep work, a calculated work, a planned work. In other words, the artistry in it was more deliberate and more profound than I thought before. So, as a matter of fact, after this case is over, I am looking forward to finishing it. As I say, I have read just the first half this time through.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Mr. Mailer, while you are on that subject, there was a reference earlier by Mr. Cowin (Assistant Attorney General), to the question of the notes, of his notes of which he has no precise memory of having written, which later became the basis of *Naked Lunch*; and I was wondering, as a writer, if you could give us your opinion what may have been involved here?

NORMAN MAILER: Yes. I listened to that very carefully because I remembered reading that in the beginning of the book; and it seemed to me, as I was reading the book, I started thinking about a matter that is one of the mysteries of writing. It is very often you can wake up in the morning and start writing and you have this experience: what you are writing about is

what you haven't been thinking about. It will come out in detail. One's best writing seems to bear no relation to what one is thinking about. There is an unconscious calculation that seems to go on in one's sleep. The work is done while you sleep, and the discipline of writing is almost to keep from interfering with that creative work that is done by the unconscious. In other words, if a man is working on a novel, that his habits are regular and precise—I am getting long-winded here for a point. The best of his habits are regular because he doesn't portray the work he is performing while conscious. In Burroughs' work I think something quite extraordinary is going on here, since the man is a self-confessed drug addict. I have heard various versions of how he wrote *Naked Lunch*. He seems to have been writing he wrote somewhere, he used to write coming out of drug addictions, at other times he says he wrote it in drug addictions, while he was a drug addict. It is possible he wrote this book in all three phases. I am just guessing this. Possibly it was written while an addict, while withdrawing, and while he was withdrawn from addiction. But what is fascinating to me is that there is a structure to the book, you see, which is doubtless imperfect. I think one reason we can't call it a great book like *Remembrance of Things Past* or *Ulysses*, the imperfection of this structure. There is no doubt as to the man's talent while it was, perhaps, excited and inflamed by drug addiction, it was also hurt. This man might have been one of the greatest geniuses of the English language if he had never been an addict. Through this there is a feeling of great torture in the composition of the book. What comes through to me is that there also is style, the subconscious going through all the various trials and ordeals of addiction, he still holds on to a scheme in the book; and there is a deep meaning. It is curious the way these themes keep recurring. I have no idea how the book was put together. The ingredients are so exceptional, like you have a banquet of thirty, forty components. You may eat in any order. You may shift them. The themes are so deeply entwined; any page put with another page creates an aura. It was so profoundly conceived. Well, it may be this book was so as I say, has no other structure than the profundity of the experience that the author had, the particular ordeal the man went through in his life; or it may be that there is a firm structure to it. It is just on the basis of these three readings. I feel the work is sufficiently complex I couldn't begin to see I found it absolutely fascinating because it draws me to read it further and further, the way *Ulysses* did when I read that in college, as if there are mysteries to be uncovered when I read it.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: When you use the words, "absolutely fascinating," and so on, do you mean also, it has importance to you as a writer and other writers? Are you expressing notion of its importance?

NORMAN MAILER: It has enormous importance to me as writer.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Before, you mentioned the unconscious and subconscious. Do you have a feeling, as a writer, that one of the important tests of a writer is to be able to summon up, to evoke unconscious material and put it into artistic form, and that in order to make his contribution, as a writer, to society? Is this part of your feeling of one of the writer's tasks or problems? And if so, has Burroughs done this very well?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, I think that I don't want to go to great length about what I think.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Let me rephrase the question more simply. Do you think that Burroughs in this book has drawn up out of the unconscious, in one way or another, a great deal of material which has become useful, which by being placed in artistic form, has become unique?

NORMAN MAILER: I think it is not only unique and useful, but I think that he has given a portrait in this work. I think this work, as one of the gentlemen who testified earlier spoke of St. Augustine, I wouldn't begin to think of St. Augustine. To me this is a simple portrayal of Hell. It is Hell precisely. In fact, Your Honor, I have written a little bit about that to bring in Should I read that, if you wish?

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: You have some notes. I think?

THE COURT: You have some notes?

NORMAN MAILER: I have some notes.

THE COURT: You may.

NORMAN MAILER: Well, in these notes, I said

THE COURT: Incidentally, when did you draw up these notes?

MAILER: I wrote them on Sunday. I have written about William Burroughs before; and I wrote about him in *Esquire* two years ago, I think, a year and a half ago. But I felt I didn't want to even look back at that. The remarks were

complimentary, but I felt I wanted it freshly. If you wish I can give this to you?

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Go ahead, Mr. Mailer.

NORMAN MAILER: William Burroughs is in my opinion whatever his conscious intention may be a religious writer. There is a sense in *Naked Lunch* of the destruction of soul, which is more intense than any I have encountered in any other modern novel. It is a vision of how mankind would act if man was totally divorced from eternity. What gives this vision a machine-gun-edged clarity is an utter lack of sentimentality. The expression of sentimentality in religious matters comes forth usually as a sort of saccharine piety which revolts any idea of religious sentiment in those who are sensitive, discriminating, or deep of feeling. Burroughs avoids even the possibility of such sentimentality (which would, of course, destroy the value of his work), by attaching a stringent, mordant vocabulary to a series of precise and horrific events, a species of gallows humor which is a defeated man's last pride, the pride that he has, at least, not lost his bitterness. So it is the sort of humor which flourishes in prisons, in the Army, among junkies, race tracks and pool halls, a graffiti of cool, even livid wit, based on bodily functions and the frailties of the body, the slights, humiliations and tortures a body can undergo. It is a wild and deadly humor, as even and implacable as a sales tax; it is the small coin of communication in every one of those worlds. Bitter as alkali, it pickles every serious subject in the caustic of the harshest experience; what is left untouched is as dry and silver as a bone. It is this sort of fine, dry residue which is the emotional substance of Burroughs' work for me. Just as Hieronymus Bosch set down the most diabolical and blood-curdling details with a delicacy of line and a Puckish humor which left one with a sense of the mansions of horror attendant upon Hell, so, too, does Burroughs leave you with an intimate, detailed vision of what Hell might be like, a Hell which may be waiting as the culmination, the final product, of the scientific revolution. At the end of medicine is dope; at the end of life is death; at the end of man may be the Hell which arrives from the vanities of the mind. Nowhere, as in *Naked Lunch*'s collection of monsters, half mad geniuses, cripples, mountebanks, criminals, perverts, and putrefying beasts is there such a modern panoply of the vanities of the human will, of the excesses of evil which occur when the idea of personal or intellectual power reigns superior to the compassions of the flesh. We are richer for that

record; and we are more impressive as a nation because a publisher can print that record and sell it in an open bookstore, sell it legally. It even offers a hint that the "Great Society," which Lyndon Johnson speaks of, may not be merely a politician's high wind, but indeed may have the hard seed of a new truth; for no ordinary society could have the bravery and moral honesty to stare down into the abyss of *Naked Lunch*. But a Great Society can look into the chasm of its own potential Hell and recognize that it is stronger as a nation for possessing an artist who can come back from Hell with a portrait of its dimensions. And I would add, and so warrants all, perhaps.

Barney Rosset developed an interest in cinema very early on in life. Going off to fight in World War II, thanks to some strings pulled by his father, he ended up, not on the front line, but serving in the photographic unit shooting in India and China. Returning Stateside, Rosset produced a film called *Strange Victory* (1948); it asked what our victory over Hitler and the Reich in the War really achieved for American life. The director, Leo Hurwitz, ended up being blacklisted in Hollywood because of the film's, seemingly, anti-American sentiment. America may have won the war, but why, the film asked: "In a country of the victors, [are] the ideas of the defeated still in fashion?" The film coincided with Rosset's political stance during the era, as detailed in the memoir, he was part Communist and part champion of the US Constitution—all for the sake of battling censorship. The publisher of Grove Press would slowly begin building a collection of film prints over several years and would launch a distribution empire of sorts, following his acquisition of Amos Vogel's entire catalog of experimental and avant-garde films following the death of Cinema 16—the influential New York cinema society. (Norman Mailer was a member of Vogel's community from the late 1940s until the early 1960s.) Acquiring the Vogel catalog made Rosset's film print collection, the largest in the United States, distributing to universities the works of such luminaries as Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, and Stan Brakhage. In the mid-1960s, as the international cinema had gained in popularity as the movie-going audience changed in the United States, Rosset found his Grove Press film distribution division reaching an apex of success when he had the option to rent out theaters in various locations around the United States to screen the controversial film, *I Am Curious (Yellow)*. Distributed by Rosset's company, and directed by Swedish writer and director, Vilgot Sjoman, *(Yellow)* stirred the hearts and minds of audiences around the United States with its "Sex and Socialism," a juxtaposition of political ideology and graphic sex-

uality. The film later was accused of violating decency laws in the United States thanks to a scene featuring actress Lena Nyman caressing and kissing a flaccid penis. *I Am Curious (Yellow)* would take Rosset back to court. This time in New York as well as in other states where he would have to go to tria. to defend the film and its artistic mer.ts The buzz around the film grew fol lowing the release of a photograph of Jackie Kennedy Onassis running out of the theater lobby following a New York screening of (*Yellow)* – which incited a curiosity in mainstream audiences, giving it new visibility, as well as massive profits.

By the time the jury trial began in New York in late-May of 1968, U.S. Attorney General Arthur Olick had exclaimed the film, "the most explicit movie ever to be imported here," as it had left "nothing to the imagination, including acts of fornication." To make their case, that *I Am Curious (Yellow* was not a work of pornography, but nstead a work of tremendous artistic merit—Grove Press once again called on the help of Norman Mailer. Mailer was questioned on the witness stand by Rosset's attorney Edward De Grazia on May 28th, 1968—predating the shooting of *Maidstone*; yet, here: the way Mailer describes *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, he's nearly talking about his own approach to *Maidstone* which he wou.d begin filming just two months later in East Hampton. [2]

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Are protest movements of the type you have writ ten about the type also involved in the film *I Am Curious (Yellow)?*

MAILER: I felt there were great similarities. In looking at the film, one of the things in the film which fascinated me was the similarities and the differences between protest movements in Sweden and in America. I was impressed on the one hand with the sophistication of the protest movements n Sweden. Primarily because it is a European country, they are used to strife and profound disagreements between the cit.zens of the country. I was im pressed with the almost good-humored air with which opponents talked to one another.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Would you please state whether you felt the film *I Am Curious (Yellow)* had artistic importance.

MAILER: Well, if I may, could I take my time to get to that point, because the problem was a large one for me before I went to see the picture, and if I might I would like to present a deep reservation I had about the picture be-

fore I saw it because I think the question is attached to the answer. In other words, my preliminary remarks are attached very much to the answer about the artistic merit or lack of it in the film...I have thought a lot about the problem of sexuality in movies, I have obsessed with the problem in one way or another for twenty years of writing novels. After all, this is not a simple moral problem. There has been a great preponderance of, let's say—put it this way: there have been many victories that have been won by people who believe in greater liberty in the arts, and I have been one of those people. I have engaged in many of these campaigns. My own books very often were considered, certain of their way, as opening new possibilities for liberty to write about sexual matters. But I have always been concerned about it because I don't think it is an easy liberty or a liberty that can be necessarily pursued promiscuously. I think it is a dangerous liberty. In movies, of course this danger is more obvious and more self-evident because movies affect the emotions so powerfully. Before I saw this movie, therefore, I was a little bothered because I had a feeling for long time that the history of movie-making was moving to the point implicit from the beginning, to the point where through stages the maker of serious movies and serious actors finally come to showing actors engage in sexual intercourse on the screen. Everything in its history shows that it is moving to that point, and this film comes closer than any picture we have yet seen. So when I heard about it I had already written in *Esquire* about a year ago that I did not know if I as a film director even welcomed this; it bothered me very much. The reason it bothered me is something that has a deep relation to the problem of the actor in Western civilization. The actor began as someone universally despised. The actor let's say five hundred years ago was despised because they felt that the actor was doing something that was half diabolical; he was playing with emotions, considered a dangerous thing to do. Woman weren't allowed to be actresses in the beginning, in the Elizabethan theater. This distrust and uneasiness carried to the modern time where, since we are vastly more liberal, progressive, and open-minded about these matters, we tend to accept the actor kissing the actress. Actually, the problem remains—and it is a deep problem—because if the actor and the actress devote themselves to a sexual act in order to create art, then you get to the point where art then is becoming more important than the sexual act, and that is an enormously moral matter to me, because if art is getting more important than the sexual act, then we are involved in a debasement of the sexual act. So I approached this

movie with great trepidation because I felt that I might not like this movie, I might find that it would profoundly violate my sense of what is proper in these very dangerous matters, because I felt there was something very uneasy about the thought of an actor and actress becoming engaged in such acts that deeply for the sake of art. When I saw the picture I was extraordinarily moved by it in a quiet way. I thought I would find the picture uninteresting from what I had heard about it ahead of time, the way it had been spoken of in various announcements, and from what I had heard of it from con testing parties. I had the impression the picture would prove to be a shocker with a lot of dull matter. In other words, I had the impression it was going to be a documentary with a lot of over sexual matter, and it would be inter esting only because you have the problem posed of what you are going to do about it. I was not prepared for a picture of the artistic dimension of this one I think it is one of the finest and best pictures I have seen in a long time, and I was very moved by it, and I found that in fact I was somewhat overcome by it because I felt the portrayal of the girl in that is almost bewitching, because she is so complex.

I left in a curious way when the picture was over. I was left with a sense of deep admiration, almost in awe, for the complex and mysterious nature of woman I thought that the particular forms of suffering and self-discovery she goes through in that picture, that odd mixture of coquetry and childlikeness in her, that sense of almost zaniness in her, and the sense of someone partly beautiful, partly crippled emotionally, sort of very ordinary on the one hand, sort of magical on the other—I though it a magnificent creation. I thought how mysterious we are as people. So I thought while the picture moved into a terribly dangerous ground I could come on the stand and testify in its favor, to say I think it is a profoundly moral movie. By that I don't mean it is a simple movie, or that the problems raised are absolutely an swered by it. I think they are answered by it if we are willing to take the view that modern times are dangerous times and that we live in relation to a series of absurdities. So that, for example, we have thirty thousand people who are killed every year driving automobiles, which is more people than are killed in most wars, yet we don't say that we must dispense with the automobile because it is necessary to modern civilization. So we have to deal dangerously in the arts with many of these matters. So I think this picture, while it deals in a dangerous fashion with dangerous subjects, nevertheless has a moral authority that left me with a feeling of awe. I felt I had encoun-

tered a major work. I felt it was one of the most important motion pictures I have ever seen in my life because it attempts to deal with the nature of modern reality, the extraordinary complexity of modern reality. There is the fact that on one hand we are witnesses to a documentary, so to speak, because as we are walking down the street someone interrogates us, asks our opinion about something. On the other hand, we are people with ideas, passionate people with ideas that we want to fulfill. Then we have personal complications in our life that do not necessarily have any relation to it. Sometimes they act exactly the opposite of our personal ideas as our contradictions reveal themselves. We are good and evil moment by moment. We are interesting, boring; we are tragic, comic. We are satiric. On top of that we don't know the nature of reality because it keeps shifting. I think ahead to a few years from now when we will have home movie cameras and home video screens which seconds later reflect and mirror our actions, when we can start taking movies this second and can see them on the screen immediately. At that time we will have difficulty in distinguishing when does the reality begin, which is the reality, when you are being photographed, or five seconds later when you look at it on your own home individual screen? In this picture there are a great many attempts to deal with the immensity of this problem. For instance, the director. You don't know whether these people are real actors or figures in a story, whether the director is a character in the picture or not. You see the cameramen in certain scenes and not in others. For instance, you see the cameramen being cameramen. All these factors come together, I think, to produce a work of art which is a substantial and major work of art, and I think it is one of the more impressive movies I have seen in my life.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Mr. Mailer, I think in part you began to answer my next question, but I would like you to state in your own way, if you can, any of the areas in which you felt this film had for you a moral or a social importance.

MAILER: I think that I tried to cover that in what I had said earlier. I think the moral and social importance for me consisted of the fact that the director was in my mind a serious artist, in fact an artist with major talents, with large, powerful talents, who was attempting to perform the work of an artist, which is to present his vision of existence. The artist bears in the twentieth century an extraordinarily odd relation to society that he did not necessar-

ily bear in other countries, because society is founded primarily upon law and the church, or, if you will, religion and law. These have been the two main guidelines of society until the twentieth century. It is only in the twentieth century that we come to feel that despite the majesties of law, and of religion, that there is something accelerating in the twentieth century at such a fast rate that religion and law, by the very fact they are institutions, and stable institutions, are not changing quite so rapidly as the nature of life. That does not mean religion and law are to be ignored or are valueless. It means people wander through more and more empty spaces not immediately touched upon by religion and law, and it is exactly in those empty spaces that art comes in and attempts to deal with the nature of modern realities, the modern realities which make us moral decisions every day of our lives. Whenever we have to make a decision and have to decide is it good to do this or that or is it bad to do this or that, and we have no experience, we have no guideline, then we are in what people have come to call the modern condition; we are in a state of confusion.... These spaces, as I would say, these empty moral spaces, these spaces where judgement is difficult because of the lack of experience or knowledge, are filled by artists well or badly. I think the importance of art in the twentieth century, the reason there is such enormous interest in the work of the artists, apart fromt the fact these works are now presented so quickly to the masses at large, is that artists by virtue of their freedom have the opportunity to attempt to give you their vision of society. Modern society is so complex that very few artists ever can give you a vision that is of any use, and I found this vision of this director Sjoman to be extraordinary because it was comprehensive, because I could look at the life of these people in Sweden and having a feeling somehow or other, and I could hardly say why, that my own life now has a better sense of proportion I began to see the absurdities, and the areas where these problems arose that I couldn't decide for myself, these terrible moral problems, began to have some focus. The main thing about the picture was that it gave me a good feeling finally about men and women, particularly about this woman in this picture. I had a feeling they were all more noble than I thought before I saw the picture. The picture left me with a feeling of—I heard the word sanctity used here yesterday, and though I wouldn't use that word, I would say that I felt slightly shriven, a slightly more moral man, and that is a rare feeling to get from a movie. The moral and social values are too self-evidenced through the emotions that the picture aroused in me and left me with.

EDWARD DE GRAZIA: Do you think the importance in these ways the film had for you and has for you can be shared by other persons in America, if they see the film?

MAILER: Well, I can say that I think so. Of course, there is no further authority than the fact that I think so. To the extent that other people are like me, they will perhaps react in the same or similar fashion. I couldn't go further than that. I think it is—I can only say I think it is a highly moral picture and at an extraordinarily sophisticated level of morality. It leaves us to deal with morality in an area where the most desperate chances have to be taken at times. In other words, someone who is profoundly religious could say that the actors may be endangering their mortal souls. Nevertheless, what we are given in return is an insight into the profoundly troubled and vital and tortured and magnificent and comic aspects of the sexual relation in young people who are living between ten ideologies and fifty different passions and ambitions.

Mr. Schilling cross-examined Mr. Mailer, first asking if he thought his own "opinion a reliable indication of whether the movie will or will not shock the American public?"

MAILER: I will not pretend this movie is not going to shock anyone. Obviously, it will shock certain people. Any number of activities shock people. If a man walks down the street and he spits in the street, it will prove shocking to certain people.

MR. SCHILLING: You said after you saw the movie you were left with a sense of awe about the mysterious nature of women?

MAILER: Yes.

MR. SCHILLING: You don't mean to suggest that before you saw the film you did not have a sense of awe about the mysterious nature of women?

MAILER: No, you are absolutely correct. Before I saw the movie I had a sense of it; it was just that that sense was deepened by the movie.

MR. SCHILLING: You stated that you were obsessed with the problem of sexuality in movies?

MAILER: Yes. May I answer, or is your question not finished?

MR. SCHILLING: My question to you is for you to state the ways in which you are obsessed with the problem of sexuality in movies.

MAILER: Obsession is a particularly powerful word, and to me what it means—because it is a word on which there is not general agreement—is that you keep going back in your thoughts to this place and you don't have an answer. In other words, you keep going back to the point.

Let's say something happened in your life at a given moment that caused you some amount of difficulty, and you keep going back to that point and saying to yourself, was it my fault, was it her fault, could it have been avoided, was I evil, was I good? That sort of thing. We keep thinking about it and keep going back to it again and again. For example, when we remember a friendship that has been broken up we keep trying to think, was it his fault, was it my fault? Such matters are obsessive. When I saw that in connection with movies what I mean by saying the idea of sexuality in movies is obsessive to me is that I have been concerned about this because I have seen it coming, I have seen the day coming when actors, by the logic of their art, would wish to indulge in sexual intercourse to fulfill the need of the picture. I did not know how I felt about it. It was a burning matter. I kept coming back to it. I kept saying, "If I were a movie director, would I do it or not?" I couldn't answer it for myself. When I went to see this picture I went to see it, as I say, with a sense almost of reluctance, because I didn't know if I necessarily wanted to start contemplating this problem at this moment.

MR. SCHILLING: You stated that the danger in portraying sexual intercourse and other sexual acts in movies is that the art might become more important than the sexual act, is that right?

MAILER: Yes, I have many conservative opinions, and one of them is the sexual act must be protected.

MR. SCHILLING: Is it your conclusion that in *I Am Curious* the sexual act was more important than art?

MAILER: Well, because it was a work of art I think something happened. You see, the sexual act is more important than art, in my opinion, but it is not necessarily more important than works of art, because works of art are also mysteries. In other words, when I call something a work of art I mean it leaves me with the same sense of mystery, of a divine presence, that the sex-

ual act gives to some and that a religious worship in a church will give to others.

MR. SCHILLING: Let's take a scene such as the scene of intercourse on the balustrade. Do you recall the scene?

MAILER: Yes, I do.

MR. SCHILLING: Is that a scene in which the sex act is more important than art?

MAILER: I would say it was not more important than art, no.

MR. SCHILLING: It was not?

MAILER: No, the problem didn't even come up for me. I didn't even see it as a sexual act. I saw it as a parody of it at that point.

MR. SCHILLING: The scene when the male lead took the rifle away from the female lead and threw her on the ground, and the scene that followed, was that a scene in which the sex act was more important than art?

MAILER: That was the moment at which I decided this might be a great picture.

THE COURT: No, the question was, in your opinion was that sex scene more important than art?

MAILER: No, because at that moment the two came together, your Honor, in my mind. In other words, I said to myself, "This is a sexual scene of the sort I have been posing as a problem, and it is also a moment of art; the two have come together; it is a magnificent moment." And I thought it was a magnificent moment because I thought there was a deep, profound, human truth in it I had never glimpsed before, and it seemed to me it had the power of a moment that you have when you have a moment of power in great art.

Mailer aside, the real highlight of *Rosset* is Rosset's various chapters on great writers like Samuel Beckett and Henry Miller. While, most of what Rosset writes has been covered elsewhere in any respective biography and in much greater depth, his perspective here on the likes of Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, and William S. Burroughs are fascinating; this is especially so when he recalls his long friendship with Samuel Beckett in particular. Ros-

set writes about Beckett's final years in Paris in a nursing home—and he's at his most sincere, honest, and best when he's remembering Beckett.

One unforgettable section in Rosset's book speaks about a time when the publisher of Grove Press traveled to Paris to visit Beckett (Rosset named his son, Beckett, after the writer) near the end of his life. In search of a book, Beckett realized that he had left the volume back at his apartment—where his wife still lived just up the street. Rosset also recounts how Beckett's fear of his long-time wife prevented his ability walk a couple blocks to retrieve the book he needed. Another memorable piece finds Rosset remembering how he delivered Samuel Beckett a portable television to his room in his Paris nursing home one afternoon so that he could watch a videotape of Rick Cluchey and other inmates at San Quentin performing *Waiting for Godot* for the first time. Like with Norman Mailer, Rosset curiously passes over just too many of his dealing with many other notable authors of the Grove Press canon. There is no talk of Rosset's dealings with John Richey or mention of the impact of his excellent and controversial Los Angeles novel, *City of Night*, had on culture, as an example. Rosset barely shares any details with the reader as to how Grove Press acquired the rights to publish *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* following the Muslim leader's tragic death. Rosset starts his memoir out in a brief introduction by making a big deal out of the likelihood that he is, by all accounts, a male chauvinist. Throughout *Rosset*, a reader never gets that impression about the Grove publisher. He goes from chapter-to-chapter introducing woman-after-woman into his anecdotes without ever giving many details about any of them, except abstract expressionist painter, Joan Mitchell, who he married at the end of the 1940s and lived in Paris with for a brief time.

In one way, *Rosset* is a kind of layman's introduction to the world of Barney Rosset. And in another, it serves as a perfect companion to the 2010 documentary film about Rosset *Obscene: A Portrait of Barney Rosset and Grove Press*, currently available on DVD. But if one is looking for more in-depth information about the history of Grove Press or any of the landmark court cases that shifted censorship in the United States, one might be more so inclined to search out any of the following additional volumes: *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer & Fanny Hilly by the Lawyer Who Defended Them* written by Cy Rembar; and *Tropic of Cancer on Trial: A Case History of Censorship* written by Earl R. Hutchinson, both shine a bright light on the legal cases.

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